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CULTURE

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Connor Storrie on the *Heated Rivalry* Finale and Playing TV's Grumpiest Romantic

by Michael Cuby



Connor Storrie in 'Heated Rivalry.' Photograph by Sabrina Lantos/HBO Max

Warning: Spoilers for the first season of *Heated Rivalry* below.

It's not hard to understand why Connor Storrie's favorite *Heated Rivalry* episode is the finale. In the debut season of the hit Canadian sports romance, his closed-off hockey star Ilya Rozanov spends five episodes denying the intensity of his romantic connection with the quiet Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams). But in the end, the former rivals finally declare their love out loud. It's the ultimate release after a season of edging. Or, as Storrie puts it, "It's starting to get real. It's the end to that yearning we've been feeling all season. We get to see deeper into these people that the viewers have invested so much time, energy, and thought into."

The finale also marks the end of a journey that has seen Storrie transition from aspiring actor to bona fide star. The 25-year-old Texas-born performer got his first taste of the limelight with a small but pivotal role in last year's *Joker: Folie à Deux*. But it's *Heated Rivalry* that has earned him the world's attention, whether people are expressing shock over his convincing Russian accent or lustily thirsting over the butt that's been featured so prominently it almost feels like a third lead. The experience has been "the biggest blessing in the world" for the new Hollywood heartthrob. "If it all ended right here, I would be so thankful and so glad."

There's a tendency for queer projects to revel in trauma, so there's something really admirable about *Heated Rivalry* ending on a happy note. Did you ever consider how important that might be to an audience?

[Show creator] Jacob Tierney was super vocal about not having this down-and-out gay story that ends in tragedy. That was really insightful for me, because I can be such a drama junkie. But I got to learn that it's important not to have this dramatic moment for the sake of my personal enjoyment, because this resonates with people and has a voice that's more than just the sex.

All season, Ilya was the most reluctant to bring the relationship out from behind closed doors. But in the finale, it's Shane who freaks out when they're discovered, and Ilya who stays calm. What did you make of this shift?

Ilya's a grump. People like these grumpy, almost weird offshoots of a "bad boy" because they play like they don't care, but they actually care more than anyone. In these more stoic cultures, it's like, if I don't know you, you're not in. But the moment you are in, I will fucking die for you. Once Shane was in, Ilya was like, "You're mine forever. I will do anything for you." Whereas with Shane, his emotional capabilities are not geared that way. He's not that much of an emotional rock.



Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie in *Heated Rivalry*
Photograph by Sabrina Lantos/HBO Max

The finale also showed us why Ilya is such a "grump"—he was the one to find his mother after she died by suicide. How did that detail inform your approach to the character?

That point is everything to me. For his dad to sweep it under the rug, for them to never speak of it again, for his brother to wish him ill because of how he showed up in the family after that —so much feeds into that moment. Those are situations that, not to sound hyperbolic, ruin people's lives. I carry that with me in everything I do with Ilya: the phone call and why it's so difficult to say something like "I love you." Or why winning the Stanley Cup feels so good for that moment. Or why it's hard to look anyone in the eye and say something genuinely nice. It's everything.

Jacob has said that he would often invoke his own personal gay sex experiences as a reference point for how things should look between Ilya and Shane. Did you find it easier to make a show with so many gay sex scenes when you were being directed by a gay man, who could guide both of you from a place of real experience?

100%! I can't imagine being directed by someone who doesn't have firsthand experience in that way, just because the sex is so specific and so visible. I think it could *work*, but I don't think it would be as awesome as it is.



Photograph by Sabrina Lantos/HBO Max

***Heated Rivalry* was renewed for a second season. How did you respond to the implications of that renewal in an era where LGBTQ+ rights (and stories) are being rolled back every day?**

That question's hard. I'm so excited to continue doing this show. I love this character, I love this story, I fucking love the people that I made it with, and I love the people that this story means a lot to. Everyone needs to prioritize stories that matter, and not just from a business perspective, but also what people are literally screaming for societally and culturally. All I can do is show up as well as I can in my show and support and champion other stories that resonate with that.

Is there anything you'd like to see for Ilya in season two?

I know the whole plot of where the books go, but I haven't read the scripts for the next season. I'd like to just deepen that vulnerability. We've played the game of discovery between Shane and Ilya, and now I want to play the game of knowing and understanding.

Your childhood YouTube videos recently went viral. What made you want to jumpstart your career at such a young age?

I've always wanted to be an actor. It's been surprising to realize just how few actors had the same experience as me, of being fresh out of the womb, like, "I want to make movies." I wanted to do it before I even knew it was a job. I was hungry, and I was sure.

YouTube was super big at the time, and it was a way to create my own media and practice being in front of the camera. It was a creative outlet, and I've always had a million hobbies.

Like, now I just wrapped production on a feature film I directed after *Heated Rivalry*. I made this iPhone feature with some very close, inspiring artist friends called *Transaction Planet*.



Photograph by Sabrina Lantos/HBO Max

Your first big acting gig was in last year's *Joker: Folie à Deux*. What was that experience like?

That's the project that got me my SAG card! Three months before I got that audition, I had watched the first *Joker*, and I wrote in my journal, "I want to be in the *Joker*," which made zero sense because there was no idea of a sequel. But a few months later, I got an audition. It wasn't until my first day on set that Todd Phillips told me what my actual part was, which was to ultimately—spoiler alert—kill the Joker. Because I'm the quote-unquote "real Joker."

Ilya and your *Joker* character share an inner darkness. Are you drawn to characters who could probably benefit from a little therapy?

My *Joker* character is a sad, pathetic man, and I don't mean "pathetic" like "loser," but "pathetic" in the sense of really inspiring empathy or sympathy for someone. If you were to draw an emotional bridge between the two of them, it would be that. For people who hurt others or choose aggression, brashness, or a tough exterior, 99.9 times out of 100, it comes from a place of hurt. Both those characters have that.

After those two roles, what would you like to do next?

I'm really turned on by playing characters that feel different from myself. When actors talk about doing things that scare you, I always thought that was a little pretentious. But after having done [*Heated Rivalry*] and having been scared, I've realized how much I love that feeling. Anything that scares me, takes that extra effort, or lets me consider a character's humanity that I don't understand straight off the bat [is what I want to do].

You've become a celebrity seemingly overnight. What has it meant for you to navigate your new reality alongside Hudson Williams?

Hudson is my best friend, and I literally can't fathom doing this without him. We were both in similar places in life before this. We quit our jobs within a day of each other. We booked this and flew out the same day. Now it's turning into two people who are being seen internationally for the first time. This has been the highlight of my life, and meeting Hudson makes that 10 times sweeter.

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